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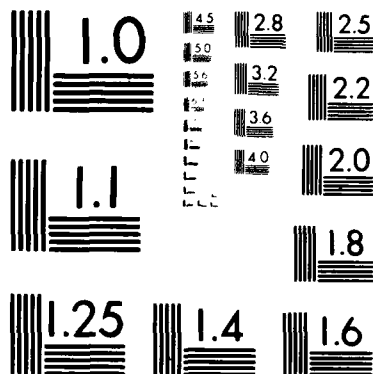
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**SOVIET POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST:  
PERSPECTIVES FROM THREE CAPITALS**

**by**

**Alvin Z. Rubinstein**

**16 June 1980**

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Composition of this memorandum was accomplished by Mrs. Barbara N. Black.

## FOREWORD

This memorandum evolved from the Military Policy Symposium on "The Soviet Union in the Third World: Success and Failure," which was hosted by the Strategic Studies Institute in the Fall of 1979. During the Symposium, academic and government experts discussed a number of issues concerning this area which will have a continuing impact on US strategy. This memorandum considers one of these issues.

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*DeWitt C. Smith, Jr.*

DeWITT C. SMITH, JR.  
Major General, USA  
Commandant

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#### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

DR. ALVIN Z. RUBINSTEIN is Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. He earned his bachelor's degree in government from the City College of New York and his master's degree and doctorate in political science from the University of Pennsylvania. His published works include: *Red Star on the Nile: The Soviet-Egyptian Influence Relationship Since the June War* (1977), *The Foreign Policy of the Soviet Union*, 3rd ed. (1972), *Yugoslavia and the Nonaligned World* (1970), and, *The Soviets in International Organizations* (1964). He is also editor of *Soviet and Chinese Influence in the Third World* (1975).

### **SOVIET POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: PERSPECTIVES FROM THREE CAPITALS**

Just as "beauty is in the eyes of the beholder," so, too, is the attribution of success or failure to Soviet Third World policy very much a function of the individual scholar, unless and until we devise some workable criteria, based on empirically and experientially rooted research, that can muster a consensus of experts capable of attracting the attention of US decisionmakers. The essays presented here contribute toward this objective. They are solid assessments of what Soviet policy has been, a record we need to know in as much detail as possible.

When assessing Soviet policy in the Third World, it is important not to impute to Soviet leaders yardsticks of success and failure that seem reasonable or compelling to us. For in diplomacy the success or failure of a policy inheres not only in palpable increments but also in the broader strategic value that the involved party attributes to the overall consequences of its policy, and of the latter we know precious little. Ideally, the Soviets should be judged in terms of success or failure in the objectives which they themselves have set up. But there is no way of knowing what ex-



expectations Soviet leaders have for a particular policy, though "guesstimates" abound. Soviet leaders do not tell us what they are after; certainly they are less than candid about the considerations that prompt specific policies. Given Moscow's far-ranging and increasingly determined pursuit of a number of simultaneous objectives in the Third World—from strengthening anti-West governments to acquiring military facilities, from exploiting US policy dilemmas and initiatives to aspiring to the former British role of arbiter of regional conflicts, from encouraging radical movements to undermining pro-Western governments and attempts by the United States to fashion its Pax Americana in the Third World—the task of singling out successes and failures becomes increasingly complex.

What is the appropriate level of analysis at which to evaluate Soviet policy? Should the focus be on the CPSU's relations with a Third World Communist party or radical movement? For example, is "success" the very close ties Moscow has forged with the self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninist leadership in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY)? Is "failure" to be seen in Ethiopia's strongman Mengistu's reluctance to establish a Soviet-style vanguard party and to staff it with pro-Soviet cadres? Or is the crucial level of analysis the government-to-government relationship? And if so, what considerations does one use in evaluating the nature or quality of Moscow's ties with Iraq, Cuba, Syria, Vietnam, and Libya? Or ought the level of analysis on which our evaluations of success and failure are based be the impact of Soviet policy on regional alignments and affairs? Perhaps strategic context transcends the importance of influence in this or that country or on this or that issue in the Kremlin's net assessment of how well its policy is faring.

Strategic context merits greater attention from Western analysts, because of all the levels of analysis it is the least ephemeral. Even if Soviet relations with, let us say, Egypt, Yemen, Somalia, Indonesia, or Nigeria did not live up to Moscow's expectations because of unanticipated and unforeseeable complications over which Moscow had little or no control—and Soviet analysts are wont to refer to the "complexity" (*slozhnost*) of developments—that is not reason enough to fault the policy that had been followed. Even in setbacks there is advantage to be derived, witness the Soviet position in the Arab world in the aftermath of Camp David and the Egyptian-Israeli treaty of March 1979. Seldom are

reverses decisive. Viewed from the perspective of the 1950's, net Soviet gains in the 1960's increased, and viewed from the 1960's, Soviet gains in the 1970's were even more evident. Quite simply, the criteria for success that I use for evaluating Soviet policy are, in order of importance, first, the changed configuration of regional alignments that emerge as a consequence of Soviet behavior; second, the extent to which US policy or interests are undermined; and third, the increments in Moscow's influence in specific countries or movements.

How one is doing depends, as noted earlier, on who is making the assessment. For example, in February 1979, as the Iranian revolution reached its climax, National Security Council Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown made a hurried trip to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel. Their purpose was variously described as an attempt (1) to demonstrate US determination to stand by our (remaining) friends; (2) to deter the Soviets from intervening on the Arabian Peninsula; (3) to explore with these three countries the possibilities of de facto military cooperation to stop the spread of Soviet influence (shades of John Foster Dulles' visit to the Middle East in June 1953!); and, (4) to mount a forceful response to the outbreak of fighting between the two Yemens. Washington, dismayed by its failure to save the Shah, obsessed by the ubiquitous Russians, and worried that our friends worried about America's "will," sought to affirm its resolute commitment to the defense of these pro-Western governments.

Washington deployed an aircraft carrier and airlifted several hundred million dollars worth of military equipment to Yemen, presumably intent on demonstrating that it was making a commitment, not a contribution. The US press lauded the administration's forceful actions, and no doubt this was tallied in Washington as a "success." But a few weeks later, I came away from a visit to Egypt and Israel with the impression that neither the Egyptians nor the Israelis were impressed by the US moves, or by the unmistakable signal that they were supposed to convey to the Soviet and PDRY governments. Indeed, in both countries there were those who thought the US response reflected panic not disciplined pressure, an egregious failure to understand the dynamics of the region's politics, and an inability to distinguish image from impact. Both believed the US response was not an effective counter to the long-term Soviet challenge, which is more

ambiguous and political. Both had the sense that America's credibility was not particularly enhanced; and both expressed concern at the US propensity toward showing muscle rather than engaging in diplomatic maneuver. Egyptian officials stressed that Iraq had taken steps to stop the Yemeni fighting by requesting an emergency meeting of the Arab League, which had already set a mediation effort in motion, since none of the Arab states, least of all Iraq, wanted an escalation of the Yemeni war with a superpower involvement. Moreover, both the Egyptians and Israelis wondered about the effectiveness of a sudden massive infusion of arms that supplied weapons the client was not capable of using and that were of questionable military utility in the Yemeni terrain. Washington may have been pleased with the exercise, because, as I have been told, it showed that "we could airlift substantial quantities of arms to a client in 48 to 72 hours." But what of the client, and what of those who have to depend on the American commitment? One is reminded of the story of the pig and the chicken who were walking along a road and came to a sign "ham and eggs." The pig looked at it and said, "for you it's a contribution, for me it's a commitment."

Talking with officials, journalists, and scholars in Egypt, Israel, and the Soviet Union over a two month period gave me a somewhat different perspective on Soviet policy from studying the phenomenon on this side. My purpose was to meet with knowledgeable people to learn how Soviet policy in the Middle East and Horn of Africa looked from Cairo, Jerusalem (and Tel Aviv, which has fine institutes on the Middle East and the Soviet Union), and Moscow. This tale of three cities has many dangling ends, but permit me to share a few observations.

Back-to-back visits to Egypt and then Israel sharpened my impressions of each country's policy outlook. There were a number of important similarities. In both Egypt and Israel, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs plays an unimportant role in analyzing Soviet policy in the area or in directly servicing the policy process of the top leadership. Strong leaders make policy toward the Soviet Union with little recourse to the analyses of subordinates or the concerns of pressure groups. In Egypt the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has a very limited research capability; in Israel, it is much stronger. To the extent that Sadat seeks ideas he looks to the staff attached to the Presidency; Prime Minister Begin looks to Weiz-

man, a few loyalists, and military intelligence. The military in both countries have excellent capabilities for keeping tabs on Soviet activities. One Egyptian journalist said that when he wants some information on what the Soviets are up to in the area he goes not to the MFA but to the Gezira Club to have a drink with a friend in military intelligence. Neither Cairo nor Jerusalem wants the Soviet Union brought into the Arab-Israeli negotiations: both mistrust Moscow, regard Soviet diplomats as utterly incapable of unbending enough to establish the close personal relationships with their opposite numbers that are essential for sensitive talks, and believe that Moscow does not want a genuine settlement, since it stands to be the principal loser. Moreover, Sadat is convinced that Moscow is out to get him. Both capitals believe that regional developments are more apt to be affected by domestic politics and upheavals than by anything the Soviet Union can do; they see Moscow's capacity for initiative or innovation as severely limited for the time being and believe that Washington tends to see the Soviet hand as far more prominent in muddying Middle East waters than it actually is. Finally, neither country studies the United States in any systematic way—a neglect top leaders do not see as harmful.

Among the observable differences two are noteworthy: first, whereas Egypt lacks any academic superstructure conducting research on Soviet policy in the Middle East, Israel has outstanding programs attached to universities and institutes. Second, in Israel most of the academics have very close ties with military intelligence, since they do annual military reserve duty; in Egypt there is no link between academic research, such as it is, and the military-political leadership.

I was in Cairo the two weeks before the Egyptian-Israeli treaty was signed, and those whom I interviewed—primarily middle-range officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (heads of departments, members of the policy planning staff, etc.)—invariably wanted to talk about the treaty and what was happening in Israel, on which they had limited information. The openness with which they expressed their lack of enthusiasm for the treaty was surprising: "The only official in Egypt who is wholeheartedly for the treaty," they said, "is the President."

Egyptian assessments of Soviet policy looked something like this. First, there was no concern over any direct Soviet threat to Egypt's vital interests in the Arab world. To the extent that there is a long-

term threat, such as Soviet intervention in another Arab-Israeli or Yemeni war, the threat was one that would inevitably enmesh the United States. The task of diplomacy was to prevent a war. Short of actual involvement by Soviet forces, the local actors had the ball and they should be encouraged by the United States to run with it more openly. The Egyptians thought Soviet influence was greatest in the PDRY. But no one thought the PDRY or any Arab country was about to fall under Soviet control, though one analyst hypothesized that Fateh Ismail had started a disturbance in Yemen to help Moscow signal Washington not to back the Chinese against Vietnam!

Second, notwithstanding this restrained evaluation of present Soviet threats in the Middle East as a whole, all concurred that Sadat is deeply anti-Soviet. (Husni Mubarak, the Vice-President, shares his antipathy toward the USSR for its supposedly limited air assistance in October 1973). Since Egypt's policy is Sadat's policy, "Egypt" officially sees the Soviet Union behind every problem. Sadat is shrewd enough to realize that this "perception" is a plus for him in his relations with the US Congress. Sadat's opposition to Soviet involvement in Ethiopia is rooted in his anxiety over the future of the Sudan. Further, Soviet courtship and encouragement to Libya is a factor seriously aggravating Soviet-Egyptian relations. The Soviet threat in Libya stems from the implicit encouragement Moscow gives to Qadaffi's intrigues and provocations, which are undertaken in the surety of Soviet protection from serious retaliation.

Third, the Egyptians stated openly that each Arab state wants to constrain Soviet activity in the Middle East but at the same time wants to use the Soviet Union for its own purposes. Moscow cannot sabotage the Egyptian-Israeli treaty, but it can provide the arms to keep the military option alive and thereby thwart US aims, and undermine Sadat's regime. All thought that the USSR wants to be part of the peace process, something it had seemingly achieved with the October 1977 joint statement. Moscow is angry because a settlement without Soviet participation would leave the Soviets odd men out.

Fourth, Cairo sees the USSR's task of establishing influence in the Arab world as more difficult now than in the 1950's and 1960's, when Arab attitudes toward Moscow were shaped in important ways by Egypt's policy, in part because of Nasser's prestige and in

part because of Egypt's intensive experience in dealing with the Russians. However, in the 1980's each Arab leadership is likely to rely on its own experience and use its own litmus test for dealing with Moscow. Additionally, each will be more active in maneuvering within the Arab world against perceived threats, with the result that coalition building and diplomatic activity will be affected by many more considerations than heretofore. In this there are both promises and pitfalls for Moscow.

Fifth, Egyptian officials found Brzezinski's notion of "an arc of crisis" wanting, because it assumed greater Soviet control over events than was warranted. American fumbling was of more concern than Soviet manipulation. Moscow intervened in response to opportunity. Judging by Egypt's experience, they thought the USSR would find it difficult to create a secure political base (epitomized by establishment of a Marxist-Leninist party) in Arab or African countries. One high ranking official noted that even in the PDRY, where life in Aden is being shaped by a Marxist-Leninist party, the bulk of the country goes on pretty much as always. The Soviets have tangible strategic advantages—landing rights, a dry dock and port facilities, storage and repair installations—but their strategic advantages do not automatically transfer to control over the internal political system or the policies pursued by Fatah Ismail. Nor are these current signposts of success any more permanent than were those Moscow once had in Egypt.

Finally, Egyptians in and out of office emphasized that the West's policy of helping Egypt improve its economic condition and prospects would have telling effect on Soviet prospects for making trouble. Meaningful support for Egypt and the Sudan now would be the best guarantee against the spread of Soviet influence in the area. The military side is important, but so is timely, effectively administered, high impact economic assistance.

My discussions with Israeli officials and scholars on Soviet policy in the Middle East yielded a rich harvest, and these brief observations cannot do justice to their perceptive assessments.

First, the Israeli military is deeply concerned about the sustained flow of Soviet arms to the confrontation states. The sheer quantity of weaponry—and Israelis say that US arms to Saudi Arabia must also be included—in the hands of avowed enemies is staggering. None of the military analysts thought the Soviet Union wanted another war, but they stressed that this was as little relevant now as it had been in 1967 or 1973. By giving Iraq and Syria a military

option and the assurance of support in the event of difficulty, Moscow is priming the trigger. The USSR is not a niggardly supplier. In general, it gives arms up to the absorptive limit of the client. The military groups disagreed on the Syrian situation—some contending that Moscow had not given Syria all that it could absorb, others insisting that it had. In the PDRY, Soviet, Cuban, and East German advisers are absolutely necessary to ensure that the weapons are used properly; in Syria and Iraq, they are not.

The different policies on arms transfers can be explained by differences in motives. Thus, the USSR has sold Qadaffi more than three times as much weaponry as Libya can absorb. There is little danger of Qadaffi's starting a war with Egypt. By selling massive amounts of arms, Moscow obtains hard currency, encourages Libyan dependency on Soviet expertise, and positions itself for the future. This situation is quite different from the buildup of Syria, whose critical mass of arms could trigger serious fighting and embroil the USSR; hence the attempt to calibrate the military demands with the political risks.

Second, Israeli analysts are as divided as their American counterparts over the supposed aims of Soviet policy and the question of whether Moscow wants a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Unlike the situation in the United States, in Israel there is a marked asymmetry between the military's views and the academic community's relatively benign views of what the Soviet Union is up to in the Middle East, what it has accomplished, and what motivates its policy. Scholars were apt to urge the necessity of bringing the USSR into the next round of the Arab-Israeli talks. Military analysts tended to be opposed, arguing (1) that the USSR, as a partisan of the Arab confrontation states, could not be expected to adopt a balanced position on any crucial issue; (2) that as long as the Soviet Union pressed imperial aims elsewhere in the Middle East, as part of its overall rivalry with the United States, it could not be expected to play a constructive role in fashioning an Arab-Israeli settlement, the consequence of which would assuredly be a diminution of Soviet prospects everywhere in the region; and (3) that there is no evidence that Moscow would be constructive. The debate on this key issue is, of course, being conducted in the US Government as well.

Third, Israeli analysts expressed concern over Washington's growing vulnerability to Arab oil pressure. They felt that this could

prompt "refinements" of vital strategic interests in ways that would be detrimental to Israeli security and to the future of the Egyptian-Israeli treaty, and that might lead the United States to misperceive Middle East realities. They did not think that the US Government's record of understanding the dynamics and complexities of Middle East currents and crises was very good.

Finally, the Israelis were skeptical of prospects for Iraqi-Syrian unity. They discounted Moscow's public declarations of support as so much propaganda, noting that Moscow has always preferred to deal with each Arab government separately. Their sense of what the Soviets are doing in each Arab country is highly developed. (Soviet Jews in Israel have not had any effect on the Establishment's perception of Soviet activities in the Middle East; few of them had experience in the foreign policy field).

The visit to Moscow served as a useful reminder that Soviet specialists are very well informed on the Middle East, with the possible exception of Israel; that they are every bit as capable as their Western counterparts; and that their published writings, on which we tend to rely so much, do not reflect the depth of their analytical competence. They are a tough-minded, highly-trained breed of professionals. Indeed, in many ways, Soviet specialists are better equipped than we to follow the day-by-day developments in most areas of the Middle East. They have an army of researchers, trained in local languages, to service the research activities of key institutes. Soviet embassies have the manpower to keep close tabs on the local press, and they are rarely staffed by political appointees. I do not know any Soviet instance comparable to the US experience in Iran, in which the Soviet establishment bungled a strong hand, in part because of the absence of adequate information. Moscow has made mistakes, but from deficient judgment, not sparse information.

The Soviet research establishment on the Middle East is informed and capable. If there are "isolationists" or "doves," I did not meet them. As is to be expected, discussions in official surroundings have limited utility, for one reason because Soviet specialists would not deviate one iota from official policy. On a number of occasions, I suggested that Soviet opposition to the Camp David peace process and the Egyptian-Israeli treaty might be interpreted as evidence of Soviet opposition to peace and detente in the Middle East and might prompt a few Senators to vote against the SALT treaty, on the ground that Moscow was not interested in



really improving US-Soviet relations. This elicited a fierce response from one leading specialist, who pointed a warning finger three times in the course of a two-hour discussion, saying, "The Soviet Union will not be pushed around. We will not allow the United States to dictate to us." This assertiveness reflected acceptance of the essential correctness of Soviet policy in the Middle East.

In private and relaxed settings, Soviet assessments were richer in detail and analytical insight. I was given a view of the "contradictions" that beset the Egyptian-Israeli treaty and attempts to fashion a comprehensive settlement that were sophisticated and subtle as the best I have heard in this country. If the Soviets come out at a different end of the spectrum in their analyses of the Middle East, it is not from want of data but from a different ascription of weights to that data and to different political preferences and objectives.

Soviet analysts may have a tougher time making sense out of US policy in the Third World than we have understanding Soviet policy there. Time and again, I was asked, "If the United States is interested in improving relations with the Soviet Union, why did it sign and then renege on the joint statement of October 1, 1977? Why did it summarily disrupt the Indian Ocean talks? Why does it persist in overreacting to Soviet support for legitimate governments, seeking to protect themselves from outside attacks, as in the cases of Angola and Ethiopia? Why does it 'threaten' the USSR with rejection of the SALT II treaty? Is the treaty not in the interests of both countries?"

Soviet specialists seemed more informed on Arab than American politics. None had ever heard of Senator Robert Byrd or Representative "Tip" O'Neill. I suspect they believe that US policy is made by a process akin to the one in the Kremlin. There are deep misconceptions concerning the relationship between Congress and public opinion, the nature of the US-Israeli relationship, and the powers of the President.

Moscow accepts the contradictions of Arab politics as a norm. Patient with dilemmas, reconciled to the permanence of regional conflicts it cannot solve, ever ready to commit resources in situations whose preferred outcomes are not always assured, and resigned to the vagaries of Arab political infighting, it seeks local advantages, more to offset its superpower adversary than to entrench Soviet or local Communist influence.

In contrast to their American counterparts, Soviet leaders are wedded to a tactical approach whose essence is a belief in the long-term efficacy of incremental gains in the region rather than a conceptual view that permits global considerations to shape regional responses. Where American policymakers are mesmerized by the goal of stability in superpower relationships, the Soviets posit differentiation and the compartmentalization of competition. Perhaps because they face no domestic pressures, they see no need for linkage: for them, tension and rivalry in the Middle East milieu are not inconsistent with peaceful coexistence or detente in Western Europe, the Far East, or SALT.

Egyptians and Israelis criticized the US administration for naivete in believing that the problems of peace and safeguarding vital strategic interests in the Middle East can be assured by felicitous combinations of activism, goodwill, and aid. Washington's propensity toward mounting initiatives was contrasted unfavorably with Moscow's doggedly inertial approach, a reflection no doubt of the former's aspirations and the latter's ambitions.

Though it has been relatively passive since Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in November 1977, the USSR is hardly in trouble in the Middle East, as many Western analysts allege. Soviet aims over the past generation have been remarkably consistent: to weaken the US position in the Middle East; to encourage *de facto* nonalignment along its southern tier; to establish a presence in the Arab world and a role for the Soviet Union in the management of regional affairs; to invest for the future. Moscow views the Middle East as a growth stock—it really doesn't need much in the way of dividends for the time being, although it has already reaped a good deal. By these criteria, the Soviet quotient of success seems greater than its quotient of failure.

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| 19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)<br>Soviet foreign policy; Middle East; Israel; Egypt   |                                      |  |
| 20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)<br>This memorandum evaluates the success of Soviet foreign policy in the Middle East. The author evaluates the success of Soviet policy by the following criteria: the changed configuration of regional alignments that emerge as a consequence of Soviet behavior; the extent to which US policy and interests are undermined; and the increments in Moscow's influence in specific countries or movements. The author concludes that Moscow views the Middle East as a growth stock--it really doesn't need much in the way of dividends for the time being. |                                      |  |

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